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A Conversation With Sissela Bok

"Buildup of Secrecy Carries Great Dangers for Democracy"

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Sissela Bok is a Swedish-born philosopher who teaches at Harvard University and has written extensively on ethical issues of broad concern. Her latest book is *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation.* She is also the author of *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life.*

Without secrets, no "sense of identity"

Secrecy is an indispensable part of life. Even if society wanted to, there is no way in which it could do away with everything that human beings conceal. If society were to try to compel people to expose all personal secrets, that would lead to the kind of loss of liberty that we think of in connection with a novel like *1984.* With no capacity for keeping secrets and for choosing when to reveal them, human beings would lose their sense of identity and every shred of autonomy.

Yet, in writing my book about secrecy, I found that in the United States many people believe that they should make as much as possible about their personal lives known to others—and they feel guilty about what they don't reveal. That may be part of America's Puritan heritage, which leads people to feel guilty about what is perfectly natural.

"Important to protect the privacy of individuals"

One cannot say that secrecy is either wrong or always right. In and of itself it is neutral. In many cases secrecy turns out to be positive, and in other cases it is harmful.

Where individuals are concerned, the presumption ought to be in favor of their opportunity to keep secrets as they wish except in special circumstances, such as in the case of criminals. If we did not respect individual secrecy, we could not have a democratic society.

In organizations, as well, it's very important to protect the privacy of individuals. But when it comes to the institution itself, I think that the presumption should be toward openness, not secrecy.

Now, a certain amount of secrecy is required for any organization to function. Governments require some secrecy from enemies and, therefore, from the citizens themselves. But that has to be kept to a minimum because secrecy in any government tends to expand and grow. There are so many things governments want to hide—not just what is legitimately theirs to conceal but also mistakes they have made and plans they may have for abuse and unwise military undertakings.

"Many dangers" in requiring polygraph tests

In a democracy, a number of institutions, the press among them, serve as a check on the tendency of government to keep secrets. And insiders within government may, if they become aware of a serious problem, blow the whistle on it. But the more acts and executive orders that the government can make use of for expanded secrecy, the more difficult it becomes to hold members of the government accountable.

In this context, President Reagan's recent executive order tightening procedures for handling classified information is a very big step. The order requires federal employes with access to classified information to agree to take polygraph tests if asked to do so when the government investigates the source of leaks. This step ought to have been carefully debated by the public before it was put into effect.

As the order stands, there are many dangers. Polygraph testing is both unreliable and intrusive. People not involved in leaking government information may be so worried or nervous about something else in their lives that the test indicates that they are lying when that is not the case. Many people might feel their privacy invaded because polygraph testers often ask questions that have very little to do with a person's job.

"Highest officials engage in leaking"

Far too much government information is already classified—studies have shown that. I question the current efforts to intensify government secrecy when so much of

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